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ABSTRACT

During the last ten years, educational theatre has evidenced a greater relevance to and a growing involvement in contemporary life. College theatre programs have become more professional, with some universities having developed their own companies or cooperative arrangements with nearby regional theatres. The variety of performance spaces in new performing arts centers on some campuses attracts many professional theatre companies. In addition, interdisciplinary college programs--drama, dance, and music--combined with campus fine arts centers have generated recent programs in theatre management and arts administration. Another trend has been the reflection of current political and social movements, with special interest in ethnic minorities--black theatre workshops, Chicano studies, and Oriental theatre. Thus, educational theatre is coming out of isolation with confidence and a sense of reality. (JM)

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CONTENTS

Black Rhetoric: Five Years of Growth. . . . 1
Lyndrey A. Niles

Selected Educational Resources in Interpersonal Communication. 5
Joanne S. Yamauchi

Towards Relevance and Professionalism: Recent Trends in Educational Theatre . 9
Frank J. Staroba

News and Notes. 13

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TOWARDS RELEVANCE AND PROFESSIONALISM: RECENT TRENDS IN EDUCATIONAL THEATRE

Frank J. Staroba

Ten years ago the term "educational theatre" still had a certain limp, artsy-craftsy connotation. The theatre program was condoned by academics out of some vague respect for the importance of theatre to the liberal arts. It was viewed skeptically by theatre professionals out of suspicion that it exposed but did not train the young artist, and their suspicions were often born out by revivals of period plays in which costumes and sets outshowed performances.

During the last ten years, however, the educational theatre has begun to come to grips with some of its irrelevancies, taking new directions. One indicator of change was the dropping of the word "educational" from the name of the national association in 1978. The new name, American Theatre Association, suggests the enlarged image the organization has of itself. It makes the "professionals" feel more welcome and more comfortable with the "educators," and both now recognize that the old distinction was artificial and damaging to the progress of theatrical art. The larger vision of the association grew from a realization that schools have resources and institutional continuity that can benefit professional theatre, decentralizing and revitalizing it. The professionals had their artistic technique and commercial savvy to contribute. As a result of this coming together, the educationists are redefining what educational theatre is on the one hand and embracing professionalism on the other.

Following the lead of the British, New York University,for example, has redefined educational theatre as drama in education, a

concept clarified by this quotation from the brochure for their program. "The term 'educational theatre' as used here includes play production for youth audiences, improvisation, pantomime, street theatre, playground activities, story dramatization, role-playing, and other dramatic activities as currently employed in British and American theories and practice of education." It includes "Present practices and potentialities of educational dramatics at all levels of instruction." It does not exclude revivals, but shifts the focus from theatre for its own sake to theatre as a teaching tool, as a process for developing self-awareness and communicating with others.

The urge to do elaborately mounted productions is still there of course, and now appears as part of another trend in American educational theatre--the increasing emphasis on technique and professionalism in university theatre training programs. Large universities such as Yale, Minnesota and Michigan have developed their own resident professional companies or invite famous companies to seasonal residence. At these and smaller schools guest artists direct and perform in productions with student casts. Other schools are developing cooperative programs with nearby regional theatres, such as the program between the University of Bridgeport and the American Shakespeare Festival at Stratford, Connecticut, or the American University program with Wolf Trap Farm Park for the Performing Arts. These associations have had their problems, but they continue to blossom. Professional companies are attracted to campuses where they find excellent new performing spaces. Some of these complexes like the new Rarig Center at the University of Minnesota can boast four theatres--proscenium, thrust, arena and experimental--offering flexibility and ease far beyond the pigeon roost, resistance dimmer palaces of Forty-Second Street.

Another aspect of professionalizing educational theatre is the increased emphasis on technique in the acting curriculum. Acceptance into acting programs now often requires audition. The programs themselves emphasize training in performance techniques and particularly in physical skills such as Tai Chi Chuan, improvisation, circus technique, dance, even Delsarte. Humanistic psychology is behind much of the current training, replacing the reliance on Stanislavski with a more eclectic pproach to sensory awareness, group dynamics, interpersonal relations, non-verbal communication. In general a shift from the inner-directed approach to an outer-directed one.

Another trend suggested by these details is an increasing emphasis on an interdisciplinary approach to theatre training. Drama programs are expanding into performing arts programs, as exemplified by the merging of the drama, dance and portions of the music program into a Department of Performing Arts at the American University, and on a larger scale by the opening of the United States International University in San Diego, which advertises that the "inter-relationship of theatre, dance, music and art is stressed. The curriculum is designed to train potential performers." (ATA Journal, March, 1973)

Related both to interdisciplinary thinking and to the rash of new fine arts centers across the country is the recent emergence of programs in theatre management and arts administration. Programs in the business of the arts, most often at the graduate level, are beginning to meet the management needs of schools and regional theatres, replacing the harried faculty chairman of the concert series with a young Sol Hurok familiar with box office, contracts, publicity, computerized tickets, grant-getting and the whole gamut of business problems. Better management of

course puts educational theatres in a better position to reap their share of monies funneled through state arts councils from the National Endowments, where increased federal appropriations promise some relief to the red-ink ledgers of theatre groups.

Current social and political movements are increasingly reflected in educational theatre programs. Interest is high in the theatre of ethnic minorities--black theatre workshops, chicano studies, oriental theatre--shown in such developments as a significant increase in doctoral dissertations in these subjects over the past ten years, in the establishment of institutes like the Southern Illinois Centre for Soviet and East European Studies in the Performing Arts, in the specialized issues of university sponsored theatre periodicals such as NYU's Drama Review issue called "Theatre in Asia," in the appearance in the United States of new foreign periodicals such as Canada's Theatre Quarterly and Concerned Theatre of Japan.

A final trend worth noting is the increasingly prominent position of performing arts in the organization of universities across the country. What probably began in the thirties as a thespian society sponsored by a jack-of-all-trades director may now be a School of Theatre in the College of Fine Arts, as it is at Oion University.

There are two generalizations we can draw from these varying trends in educational theatre over the past ten years. First, college theatre programs are becoming more professionally oriented, stressing technique in their curricula. Simultaneously many schools are redefining educational theatre as an educational instrument. Second, interest in ethnic theatre, expansion into arts management, institutional growth and sophistication all indicate a growing relevance and involvement of educational theatre in contemporary life.

The growth in national prominence of the American Theatre Association, and especially of the production of the American College Theatre Festival at the Kennedy Center are further evidence that the educational theatre is beginning to take a place in the national art world. In general it is coming out of isolation into the provost's office, the board room, the Congressional hearing room, the street corner and the barrio, with confidence and a greater sense of reality.

Frank J. Staroba is Director of the Division of Fine Arts at Federal City College.

NEWS AND NOTES

National Communications for Freedom Week

National Communications for Freedom Week was held March 10-16, 1974. The Third Annual Black Careers in Communications Conference was a part of many national events that week. Sponsored by the School of Communications at Howard University, the Conference included career interviewing, programs on community resource development, professional resource development, a panel discussion on "New Approaches and Trends in Speech Pathology and Audiology," an audio-visual workshop, a panel on "The Black Communicologist in the 1970's," and addresses by FCC Commissioner Benjamin L. Hooks and the Reverend Jesse Jackson, President of People United to Save Humanity (PUSH).

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A new play by FCC Communicative Arts major